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CUT-CONTINUANCE

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It. *Dis/continuità*; Fr. *Césure*; Germ. *Schnitt-Kontinuum*; Span. *Cortada-continuidad*. The Japanese expression *kire-tsuzuki* 切れ続き refers to a traditional aesthetic notion that has been mostly analyzed and developed at a philosophical level, in recent times, by the philosopher Ōhashi Ryōsuke (1944-). The structure of *kire* (literally, “cutting” or “slash”) works in some classical texts of the Japanese literary and poetic tradition: notably, it was in the *nō* drama and in the poetic form of *haiku* that this kind of aesthetic experience was elaborated and accomplished; nowadays, it is often present to carry on a specific spatio-temporal dimension in architecture.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

Although it is possible to find references or hints to the notions of *kire* in different Japanese artistic traditions, only since the 1980s the term has been associated to a philosophical discourse. The noun *kire* plays in assonance (it is almost a homophone) with the adjective *kirei* 綺麗, that usually means “beautiful”, “graceful”, or “lovely”. The pronunciation is almost the same, indeed, but the Chinese character is different: *kire* (and its verbal form, *kiru* 切る) means “to cut off”, “to separate”, “to end”, “to come out”. Ōhashi underlines the linked expression with the verb *tsuzukeru* 続ける (“to continue”, “to go on”): the binomial expression *kire-tsuzuki* 切れ・つづき (“cut-continuance”, or “cut-continuum”) is the complete denomination that defines an interruption, an outage, a hiatus that *at the same time* cuts off and bridges in space and time some areas, parts, verses, figures, or composing elements. It affects most of the traditional Japanese arts and craftsmanship, such as flower arrangement (*ikebana*), rock gardens (*karesansui*), ink painting (*sumie*), calligraphy (*shodo*), and martial arts (*budō*).

Like many Japanese concepts, also this one points above all to an experience, it fosters a form of practice. First of all, it accomplishes a specific function in poetry: in a *haiku* – the shortest form of Japanese poetry, with three verses of five, seven, and five syllables each – the *kireji* 切れ字 (“cutting word”) works as a sort of

empty word or sound, which is impossible to exactly translate. In Western translations, only non-phonetic signs, such as suspension points, colon, or ellipsis, can convey its presence and effect. Some examples of *kireji* can be the sounds *kamo* かも, *ya* や, *kana* かな, *keri* けり, *mo* も: these words signal a divide, a turning point, an in-betweenness that breaks the verses' unrolling. But this partition implies a continuity, a link, a sort of passageway. What separates, at the same moment, also unites. A vivid example can be taken from Matsuo Basho's famous *haiku*: *Furu ike ya / kawazu tobikomu / mizu no oto* ("Ancient pond... / A frog jumps in / The sound of water"). We can witness this structure not only in poetry. In the experience of *nō* theatre, the particular form of an actor's walking is a typical occasion to make *kire* appear. The actor, in fact, moves his feet in a rhythmical way: every single step cuts off the preceding step, and prepare the new one without simply flowing on.

This "continuity in dis-continuity" does not affect only the way of walking but reflects a more encompassing character of human existence. It shows the connection between life and death, a notion that the Japanese language expresses with the binomial word *shōji* 生死, "life-death" (or "life and death"), i.e. the fundamental unity and continuity of living (*shō*, or *ikiru* 生) and dying (*ji* or *shi* 死). The same could be said about the relationship between inspiration and exhalation in breathing: they are in such a relation of "cut" and "continuance".

In *kire*, both "space" and "time" are evoked. The cut-continuance structure does not apply only to a spatial dimension but also involves a rhythmical nature that has to be perceived by the spectator's well-refined eye or ear. This rhythm is a natural one, and here we understand a typical character of Japanese aesthetics: art works like nature – they have both the same "structure" (*kōzō* 構造) – and not as an artificial design (*ishō* 意匠). So, the aesthetic experience of *kire* represents the "place" of manifestation for some of the deepest and richest expressions in Japanese art, aesthetics, and ethics. By the intervention of *kire* as a tool, existence in space and time can be enlivened and fully perceived: this is the intuition that is deeply rooted in Japanese culture.

The aesthetic tension underlined by the notion of *kire* represents a historical category, too. In fact, in Japan the so-called "modernity" occurred at the end of 19th century, and major transformations were experienced by society and culture at large. Struggling to compete with Western economic and military power, Japan embraced a foreign form of rationality and was conditioned to change its vision of artistic production and experience. Art as a "true imitation" of nature finally replaced the idea and practice of cut-continuance, by stressing the continuity or, on the contrary, the sharp difference between the two domains of art and nature themselves (forgetting the subtle yet rigorous structure of cut-continuance preserved until then). Nonetheless, from the present time, modernity can be re-interpreted as a wider form of *kire*.

At last, the notion of *kire* acquires an ethical aspect. It points out the separation and the relationship between life and death, between different forms of society and human communities, and reveals the all-encompassing character of impermanence as the true, spontaneous dimension of every single event of reality. In this way, the "play" of nature and art, detached from the artist's ego, shows a quality of inner freedom. In contemporary times, when technique seems to pervade all human experience, and everything

risks being even, uniformed, inscribed in the only paradigm of effectiveness and function, the structure of *kire*, seems almost forgotten and deleted. But as long as a de-coinciding structure like *kire* can be enlivened again – this is Ōhashi's, Pasqualotto's, and Jullien's omen – it can preserve plurality and difference, re-activating the true character of art and existence. In fact, the structure of *kire* lies at the basis of every kind of art, or every aesthetic experience: it is the very place of art, it is its “truth”, in a continuous de-coincidence within itself as well as in comparison to the natural processes. So, it can also work as the perfect antithesis of a mechanized life in contemporary society.

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